

Oh Mom, poor Mom, the CIA's made you so sad

Orchids for Mother. By Aaron Latham.
315 pages. Little, Brown. \$8.95.

Since Watergate the chains of the CIA's National Security curtain have been forced apart a little more and the glimpse within has shocked more than just the native. Notably, two books by former CIA people, Victor Marchetti's "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence" and Philip Agee's "Inside the Company," documented the day-to-day activities of the Agency in the United States and throughout the world. The CIA's country-by-country objectives began to be exposed and Americans didn't like them.

If for the citizen the discovery that this shadowy, grotesque spy-world really exists is useful information — in the same sense as is your neighbor's disclosure that your house is on fire — for the alert writer it is a windfall. The CIA-background novel has become a target of opportunity. Here is a chance to write a thriller, to be sure, but a thriller with an authenticity and a serious dimension that spy fiction has more often than not lacked. An author can disturb the reader with a sharp, accurate picture of the CIA intruding into the lives of ordinary people both at home and at the farthest corners of the earth. And at the same time he can open wide the gates to his own inventiveness and excite and delight the reader; recent revelations have made the wildest of imaginings plausible.

Aaron Latham has set out to make of his first novel "Orchids for Mother" such a double-barreled success: serious book about the CIA and spy-story of wild schemes. His successes — and they aren't many — are in the latter vein.

The main plot, a history of office intrigues that is at once petty and, strangely enough, implausible, could have made an adequate story of 15 pages. At 20 times that length it's less than lively. The adversaries are Mr. F. X. Kimball, code-named Mother, an effete, vaguely aristocratic, reactionary, mildly colorful Cold Warrior, whose domains are Counterintelligence and Israeli operations; and O'Hara, an organization man and lifetime boy scout leader who — like the real-life William Colby — earned the Directorship by heading the Phoenix assassination program in Vietnam, in which capacity he managed to accumulate 20,000 victims. Beside such an achievement those of Robespierre and Lenin Calley grow pale.

The supposed hatred between O'Hara and Mother, which the author depends on for his plot and doesn't explain until the last pages, is in no sense convincing. The motivation he throws at the reader and the characterization he works in just don't fool anybody. Instead of devoting his attention to such traditional novelistic concerns as action, emotion, atmosphere, language and character, Latham relies on cute "insights." These first annoy the reader, then make him drowsy.

The ending is one of the book's good points. It is surprisingly satisfying. The book also has a couple of passable bedroom scenes and, buried somewhere in the middle, a good brief action sequence where a team of CIA novices, with nervous Paul Fitzsimmons as leader and his hot-and-cold lover Frances as triggerperson, attempt a dummy presidential assassination in the Canal Zone, with a bazooka. It's only a training exercise and unfortunately it has nothing to do with the plot.

The love sub-plot isn't "Anna Karenina" or even good, but here it's the only story to speak of. It isn't surprising (considering that for most of the book nothing happens) that one is grateful for Paul and Frances. There are occasions when the reader becomes involved in their struggles.

So much for the spy-story element. Perhaps Latham did not intend to make the book entertaining. Perhaps it is intended really as a serious commentary on the CIA and what is wrong with the government of the United States. If so, the trouble is, no reader will take it seriously.

Very little, in short, is said about the CIA that Agee — whom Latham draws on heavily — and Marchetti haven't said before, and better. And the real issues — for example, how our economy requires for its survival the subordination of other economies — are skirted or censored out. The book is a liberal make-over, a ride on a fad that will shake no one's complacency; a rehash of news articles. One suspects that Latham is the kind of liberal who thought the war in Vietnam was a "mistake," an accident. There is nothing that would be called probing into the causes of anything. History, in Latham's eyes, is a game of some few large, dull personalities.

The only area of the novel in which one senses some fire and conviction is Israel, on which Mr. Latham takes a Zionist position. The Arabs are villains; the Israelis can do no wrong. The Israeli losses in the Yom Kippur War — Latham provides a vivid little battle-scene — are the deliberate sabotage of his Kissinger-character, a stab-in-the-back. Latham hints that as the United States stumbles forward, unraveling like a party that's gone on too late, Israel can count on the support of only the far right here. Perhaps last month's election there shows the Israeli electorate has bought this line, too.

GERALD KURTZ